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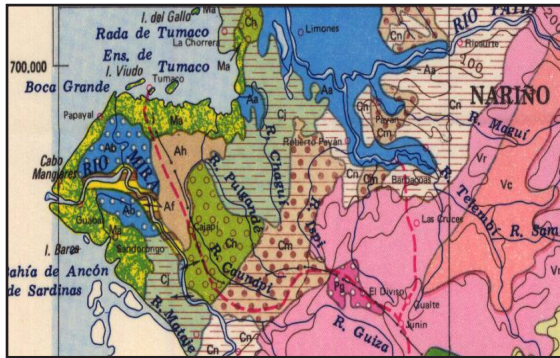
**COLOMBIA**

## SUCCESS STORY

### Dream Comes True for Bajo Mira/Frontera Afro-Colombian Community

*"I am amazed by this process. In 70 years I've never learned so much about our patrimony."*

Silvio Benavides, Lifelong Resident of the Bajo Mira Region



The Tumaco Region on the Pacific Coast  
Department of Nariño, Colombia

On August 23, 2005, in a ceremony marked by rain storms, the Bajo Mira/Frontera communities located in the rural municipality (analogous to a US county) of Tumaco, in the department of Nariño (southwest Colombia), celebrated the formal establishment of their own Community Forestry Enterprise. Its purpose: sustainably manage the 9,705 hectares (23,971 acres) of natural forests they collectively own.

The Bajo Mira/Frontera communities consist of 53 different small settlements and villages along the edge of the Mira River, inhabited by 6,200 persons of mostly Afro-Colombian heritage. Most communities along the Colombian Pacific coast are plagued with dire poverty from a lack of economic opportunities. The residents make a living by fishing, small-scale farming, and logging. This program is designed to help protect the forests and lead toward a brighter future for all.

Scientists consider the Bajo/Mira area one of the world's richest biological "hot zone habitats." Home to a rich variety of plant and animal species, including some yet to be identified, illegal logging was depleting many high-value plant and animal species.

The USAID-funded *Programa Colombia Forestal* (Colombia Forestry Program) was created to conserve and sustainably manage forests like these.

#### Telling Our Story

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With expert guidance from the *Programa Colombia Forestal*, residents of the Bajo Mira/Frontera communities have developed a forest management plan with two objectives: sustainably maximize economic gain from natural forests; *and*, protect the habitat for the future.

Their plan defines sustainable forest-use volumes to ensure future biodiversity.

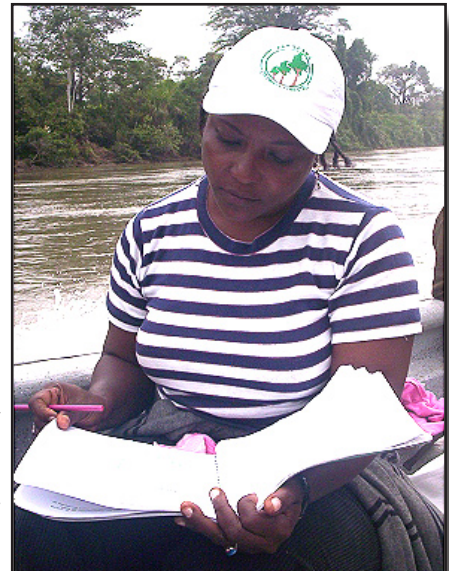
In addition to the forestry plan, the 1,606 families in the Bajo Mira/Frontera communities collectively developed internal regulations governing how they may use their lands.

As a first-step, USAID/Colombia helped to develop and implement an assessment of current forestry practices. The goal was to establish valid benchmarks for future policies and activities. Each community held workshops to discuss and clarify such issues as:

- **Usage for Private vs. Communally-owned Lands**
- **Management of Communally-owned Lands**
- **A Communal Vision for Future Resource Management**

With this foundation for developing the Community Forest Enterprise, including a communally-approved method for allocating profits, residents of the Bajo/Mira communities now have the *only* community Forestry Management Plan to be approved thus far by the Colombian government. They also have the first internal regulations for the use of natural and forestry resources on Colombia's Pacific coast. The Community Forestry Enterprise began to harvest timber from a 220-hectare (543 acre) tract, in February of 2006.

Silvio Benavides, a community elder, expressed his feelings through tears of joy: "I am amazed by this process. In my 70 years I've never learned so much about our patrimony." Now, the residents of the Bajo Mira/Frontera communities are awakening from their dreams to the reality of developing a higher standard of living in a sustainable future.



Bajo Mira/Frontera Resident Prepares to Help Manage Community-owned Forest Lands.

Photo: Programa Colombia Forestal